

# —Vodou: A Haitian Way of Life—

- What do you know about Vodou?
- What stereotypes about Vodou practices are typical in the United States?

*Discuss these questions. Review your answers after you read these two articles which introduce us to the history and practice of Vodou. Additional readings are suggested in the resource guide.*

## Vodou in Haiti

By Donald Cosentino

Scholars now call the African-derived religion of Haiti Vodou, which means “spirit” in the Fon language. Fon people live in the West African country of Benin. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, many Fon, along with Yoruba and Ibo people from neighboring Nigeria, Kongo people from Zaire and Angola in central Africa, and other African ethnic groups, were forced into slavery and sent to the French colony that would become Haiti.

Although these people came from different cultures, they shared many religious traditions. They all revered a god who was the maker of all things. Because the distance between this supreme god and humans was very great, Africans also honored spirits who were less powerful than this god but more powerful than humans. These spirits included ancestors of the living, spirits of twins, and other spiritual beings who represented forces of nature (i.e. the ocean, sky, sun, lightning, and forests) or human emotions (i.e. love, anger, mercy, laughter, and grief).

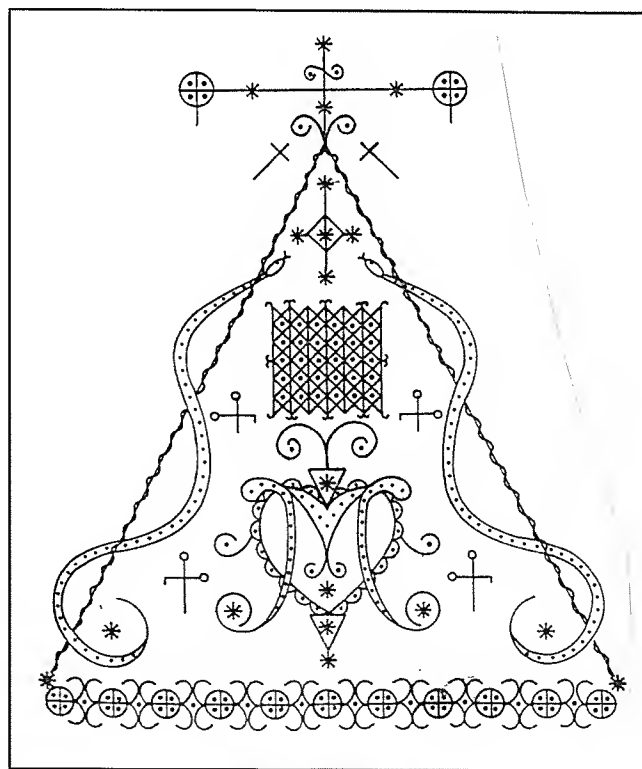
In time, the slaves combined these common beliefs into one religion. They called the supreme being Bondye (from the Creole words for “good god”) and identified Bondye with the Christian creator. Since Bondye was far away, they called on ancestral and twin spirits who lived nearby for supernatural help. Nonmortal spirits gathered together from many African religions are called *lwa*. They are thought to be very concerned with human welfare and are called upon to solve problems. There are hundreds of *lwa*, but the most famous include the kind and fatherly snake spirit Damballah; Ogun, a forceful military spirit; Erzuli, the queen of love and beauty; and Guede, a gross trickster who lives in graveyards but also loves and cares for children.

Because the *lwa* are close to humans, they enjoy human hospitality. Therefore, during a Vodou ceremony, the people may sacrifice a small farm animal, often a chicken or goat, to them. Afterward, the worshippers cook and eat the animal. To attract more divine attention, servants of the *lwa* draw special emblems, called *veve*, on the floors of the *hounfours* (Vodou temples) and dance and sing their favorite songs.

The *lwa* communicate with their servants through a spiritual possession of their minds and bodies. Spirit possession is common in many religions throughout the world, including the Pentecostal and Holiness churches in the United States. In Haiti, it is said that the *lwa* ride their servants like horses and sometimes are called divine horsemen. When a worshiper is being ridden, he or she speaks and acts like the *lwa*... Afterward, the person who was possessed cannot remember the experience.

The Haitian Revolution began in 1791 during a secret Vodou service when the slaves vowed to free

Continued on page 39, column 2.



**Veve Drawing**

From: Ferere, Gerard Alphonse. (1989.) *LeVodouisme Haitien/Haitian Vodouism*. Philadelphia: St. Joseph's University Press. Bilingual Edition.

## Music and Vodou

By Ronald Derenoncourt

*Haitian musician Ronald Derenoncourt (Aboudja) plays in a musical group called Sanba Yo, which draws inspiration from the singing and drumming of Vodou services. In the following interview, he explains why he believes that Vodou is indeed "more than a religion"—it is a foundation of Haiti's way of life.*

**F**or three years, Aboudja and fellow musicians conducted research on Vodou. We learned to gather about the people, the rhythms, rituals—not as tourists, but by spending months at a time with them. We came as students, and they were our teachers. I was arrested 27 times during my research. This was during the Duvalier regime, up until 1986.

In 1986, they formed the musical group Sanba Yo. Sanba, an indigenous word used by the Indians who lived on this island, means musician. Every member of Sanba Yo is involved in Vodou. In vodou there is a spirit called the lwa. The lwa is not a spirit in the Catholic sense, it is the energy that we keep locked inside ourselves. With the help of the music and the singing, we liberate that energy.

The slaves came here from all over Africa. Although they were forced to speak a certain way, adopt European names, and submit to baptism, they never forgot their culture. At night, they kept dreaming about freedom.

Many slaves fled the plantations, and these "maroons" created camps in the mountains. But they came from different ethnic groups, different cultural and religious backgrounds. In the maroon camps, in order to survive, they had to get together to work the land, practice their religion, and live. They needed a consensus, and that way of life was Vodou.

Vodou gave us our independence. It's the only resistant force we have in this country. It's the only force that really can resist cultural attacks from outsiders. Vodou is more than just a religion—it's really a way of life. Vodou is the fuel of this country.

There is a class of people in Haiti who have houses and cars; they are well off. But they are not patriotic about the history or culture of their country. Sure, they listen to our music and they like it, but they hear it as exotic music, like an American would.

Cosentino, Continued from previous page.

themselves. Ever since, Vodou has been a vital part of Haitian history. Pictures of Catholic saints are painted on hounfor walls to represent the lwa. Catholic prayers and symbols are used in Vodou ceremonies. Ceremonial costumes, rituals, and designs are copied from the Free and Accepted Masons, a secret fraternity. Through these "recyclings," Vodou has helped African people to survive slavery and to make sense of their lives in the "New World." Vodou is a religion of tolerance. It has kept alive old African beliefs and borrowed freely from European traditions.

Not everyone in Haiti practices Vodou. Some Haitians are opposed to the religion, and followers of Vodou have often been persecuted by the government. But the new Haitian Constitution recognizes Vodou as the inheritance of all Haitians, and there is a growing appreciation in the United States of the influence of Vodou on our own culture. Vodou music has inspired American jazz and rock'n'roll. Paintings by Vodou artists such as Hector Hyppolite and Andre Pierre are now recognized as treasures of world art. If we put aside our negative stereotypes about "voodoo," we will see Vodou as an important and exciting expression of African culture in the New World.

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The radio stations in Haiti don't play our music. There are just a few stations which begrudgingly give two hours a day for Vodou music. The people who control the radio must be interested in destroying their own culture, or they would play more traditional music. They are encouraging the city people to care more about Michael Jackson than about their own music.

Our mission is to publicize our music; that's why we sometimes have to go abroad. But we wouldn't mind staying here and playing our music for our own people, because our music belongs to them. Without them, it wouldn't exist.

Interview with Ronald Derenoncourt (Aboudja) by Kathie Klarreich, Port-au-Prince, 1989.